

Literacy Starts with

Effective professional development must be at the heart of efforts to nurture adolescents' content-area reading skills.

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Studies of effective secondary school reading programs demonstrate one thing clearly: We cannot significantly improve the literacy skills of adolescents without comprehensive staff development (Sturtevant et al., 2006). Many middle and high school teachers have not been trained in current theories of content literacy. Without additional support, these teachers often lack the skills to make disciplinary knowledge accessible to all students—especially struggling readers and learners (Brozo & Simpson, 2007).

Our experience working with school-based adolescent literacy projects confirms the need to put professional development at the heart of such efforts. Here, we present five principles to guide such professional development, drawing on our work with Hoover High School in southern California and Foothills High School in eastern Tennessee.

Hoover is an inner-city school that enrolls more than 2,000 students, 99



percent of whom qualify for free or reduced-price lunch and 70 percent of whom speak a home language other than English. In contrast, Foothills, located at the base of the Great Smoky Mountains, is the only high school in a small working-class community of about 7,000 residents; it enrolls about 500 students, 25 percent of whom are ethnic minorities.

Principle 1: Offer teachers a manageable number of new strategies.

Like students, teachers need scaffolding for change. If overwhelmed by having to teach too many new strategies to build adolescent literacy, teachers may find it easier to stick with the status quo.

At Foothills High, for example, the teachers agreed to embrace just three initiatives that would provide consistency for students and a common set of schoolwide teaching experiences for

themselves: (1) sustained silent reading to increase time spent with print and to develop the reading habit, (2) use of multiple books and sources to give students experiences with a variety of engaging print genres, and (3) use of lesson impressions (Brozo & Simpson, 2007) to generate interest in class topics and create regular opportunities for content-focused writing. (The lesson impression involves presenting students with several words and phrases to enable them to form an impression of the topic to be studied. Using these words and phrases, students write brief essays or stories, which are then compared with the actual content.)

A commitment to a small but manageable set of strategies helped teachers feel that everyone was putting a common shoulder to the wheel in advancing the literacy reforms. Although we are not suggesting that

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three is the magic number, focusing on developing expertise around a specific set of strategies benefits both teachers and students.

Principle 2: Move from workshop to classroom.

Inservice workshops are the most common form of professional development for secondary school teachers in schools implementing new reading initiatives. But to bring about deep learning and lasting change, such work-

shops must be coupled with support for teachers' sustained efforts to implement literacy and learning innovations (Cooter, 2004).

At Foothills, we provided two full-day workshops to introduce various instructional strategies just before the start of the new school year; then we went into classrooms throughout the year to conduct lessons using those strategies. We followed up with opportunities for teachers to team teach the strategies with us or try them on their

own as we observed and provided feedback. Because of this in-class modeling and subsequent support, we observed many instructional improvements.

For example, we conducted a lesson impression in a 10th grade history class as a prelude to students studying an essay about the U.S. Civil War and the writer Stephen Crane. We gave students words and phrases from the essay—including *hero*, *fear*, and *ideal versus real*—and asked them to write short compositions in a genre of their choice



PHOTO BY KEVIN DAVIS

using the words. Some students wrote stories; others wrote newspaper accounts or letters; others created dialogues. The students shared their impression writing with the whole class, and we encouraged them to identify similarities and differences among the various compositions.

Students then read the assigned essay. Next, we gave them Venn diagrams and asked them to chart the main ideas of their lesson impression compositions, the main ideas presented in the essay, and the overlapping ideas. This process kept the class focused and attentive.

Afterward, we met with the history teacher during his planning period to reflect on the effectiveness of the strategy and discuss ways he might use it himself. During the following week, we worked with the teacher to develop his own lesson impression activity for another Civil War topic, General Sherman's march through the South.

After observing the teacher guiding the class through this activity, we met again with the teacher to offer feedback and respond to his questions concerning different ways to implement the strategy with other content and make it even more engaging for his students. After three or four attempts to employ the strategy, the teacher reached a level of comfort and confidence that enabled him to add it to his instructional repertoire.

Principle 3: Establish forums for teacher empowerment.

Many secondary teachers need to not only adjust their practices, but also change their beliefs, accepting greater responsibility for their students' literacy development. Transforming beliefs requires that teachers have a genuine voice in planning, implementing, and evaluating the improvement efforts.

At Hoover High, teachers gathered in focus groups to discuss and propose literacy priorities for their students. Emerging from these conversations were

such proposals as daily independent reading, regular teacher-student conferences, and block scheduling. The school put these reforms into practice, and teachers highlighted them as contributing to Hoover's improved student reading scores.

In addition to holding teacher focus groups, the school established a staff development committee to identify strategies for reading across the curriculum that all teachers were expected to incorporate into lessons. After extensive teacher input and research, the committee set the literacy agenda for the school, which included

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such strategies as writing to learn, K-W-L charts, concept mapping, reciprocal teaching, vocabulary instruction, instruction in note-taking techniques, and readalouds (Fisher, Frey, & Williams, 2002). The committee was also responsible for finding appropriate workshop facilitators to present these strategies at the beginning of the year and for arranging additional monthly meetings during the school day, once a month, in which teachers could discuss their challenges and successes implementing the selected strategies.

Principle 4: Vary the formats used in staff development.

Professional development for secondary literacy should not be one-size-fits-all. Instead, schools should make a variety of staff development formats available to teachers. At Hoover High, we use four formats:

One facilitator, 125 teachers. These sessions with the entire faculty are designed to introduce big ideas, motivate staff, and provide an overview of priorities for the year. For example,

Hoover has brought in Harry Wong, Jaime Escalante, and Jonathan Kozol to present in this format. These presentations have focused on student engagement, classroom procedures, and improving student achievement in urban schools.

One facilitator, 31 teachers. In these smaller sessions, conducted monthly during teachers' prep periods and facilitated by members of the professional development committee, teachers practice and apply what they learn. They demonstrate content literacy strategies for their peers, discuss implementation challenges, ask questions of one

another, discuss professional readings, and engage in collaborative learning.

One facilitator, 4 teachers. In these meetings, which we call *coaching clinics*, a teacher agrees to present his or her implementation of a specific strategy for a small group. Up to four teachers can sign up for each session, which occurs during a prep period. The format is fairly consistent: The presenter has 10–15 minutes to summarize his or her use of the strategy; then each attendee has 5–8 minutes to practice using the strategy in front of the small group. This rehearsal opportunity increases the likelihood that the teachers will use the strategy back in the classroom.

One-on-one coaching. Every eight weeks, 30 pairs of teachers are selected for collegial coaching on the basis of proposals they have submitted to the leadership team. The proposal must specify what instructional strategy the pair will work on and identify dates when each person will observe the other's teaching. To prepare for the coaching, the selected teachers attend sessions focused on peer coaching and

providing nonjudgmental feedback. Over time, teachers have become skilled at observing students at work and identifying instructional strategies that facilitate learning. For example, one pair, which included a history teacher and science teacher, studied vocabulary instruction. The history teacher observed the science teacher using vocabulary journals. The teachers' conversations focused on keeping students interested in word learning through a variety of instructional routines.

In addition to these four formats for in-person professional development, some schools employ technology, such as videos, discussion boards, e-mail lists, and podcasts. Varying the format ensures that all teachers have opportunities to engage, share what they know, and expand their instructional repertoires.

Principle 5: Start with those who are most eager, and then spread the learning.

We have found that it pays to concentrate staff development efforts on those teachers and staff members who show the greatest interest in the reform. Teachers who are eager to learn new strategies and attempt new practices in their classrooms deserve the full support of any professional developer. As individual teachers become increasingly expert in employing innovative literacy strategies, their enthusiasm grows and spreads to the colleagues with whom they interact. At the same time, professional developers need to retain an attitude of openness to all teachers, including those who act more resistant to change, by creating interesting and worthwhile opportunities for them to receive technical assistance and support.

For example, after initial exposure to the strategy in a workshop, a Foothills biology teacher became intrigued by the idea of using print sources other than the textbook to aid the lowest-ability



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readers in her class. She sought us out for extra guidance, and within a couple of weeks she was reading aloud to her class from Farley Mowat's novel *Never Cry Wolf* (Back Bay Books, 2001) in conjunction with a unit on ecosystems, in addition to allowing her struggling students to use Internet sites with easy-to-read articles on related class topics.

Convinced that these practices were responsible for increasing engagement and achievement among her low-performing students, the teacher shared the new approaches with her science department colleagues, both formally and informally. Before long, she gained a couple of allies who had originally been less eager to move away from the textbook. All three of these educators sought out our support, asking us to observe in-class demonstrations and provide feedback.

Staff developers should watch for those teachers who are ready to adopt content literacy strategies and who can subsequently facilitate their peers' use of

these practices. They should also promote a system of incentives and rewards for teachers who contribute positively to the reform effort. These incentives may include grants, additional resources, elevated professional status, or recognition at events such as trainings or staff meetings.

Responsive Staff Development

In our experience, almost all successful secondary literacy programs are distinguished by an investment in high-quality teacher professional development. In turn, this investment pays dividends in the form of greater student engagement and higher student achievement. Responsive staff development can transform secondary teachers into highly qualified professionals with expertise in both subject matter and content literacy. And students are the beneficiaries. **EL**

References

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